Tolkien Through the Eyes of a Mediaevalist[1]

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Abstract[2]

The Lord of the Rings, ever since its publication, has been something of a nuisance to traditional literary critics and has been maligned often and with zest. The main reason for these strong – and often irrational – reactions can be found primarily in the fact that *The Lord of the Rings* does not fit into the literary mainstream and challenges standard critical assumptions about what a work of twentieth-century fiction should be like. The standard toolkit of the literary critic seems utterly inadequate. Mediaevalists, in contrast, have often taken a more sympathetic view of Tolkien's work. My contribution will therefore present several 'mediaeval' approaches towards Tolkien, evaluate their critical value and discuss their contribution towards a more adequate understanding of Tolkien's literary work.

INTRODUCTION

All roads lead to Rome, or so it is said. The roads to Middle-earth and to Tolkien are not as numerous, but the last few decades of Tolkien criticism have shown that there exists a wide variety of approaches towards understanding Tolkien's work. The 'interpretatio mediaevalis', i.e. the explanation and exploration of Tolkien's work with the help of mediaeval studies, is one of them and, as I will argue, not the least one. It claims that a working knowledge of the various mediaeval languages and familiarity with mediaeval culture and literature is indispensable for the appreciation of

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2 I would like to thank Allan Turner for his knowledgeable comments and helpful suggestions.

Tolkien's work. The ideal mediaevalist would possess expertise in all the different European national languages and cultures. These 'ideal mediaevalists', however, are few and far between, while the ever-increasing specialisation in academia has led to subdivisions and restrictions. Being the product of the European academic system, I too suffer from these limitations and I will therefore restrict myself to the Anglicist mediaevalist's point of view.

Michael Drout, in his study *Beowulf and the Critics by J.R.R. Tolkien* (published 2002), propagates the 'interpretatio mediaevalis' (without explicitly labelling his approach) and provides the following characterisation:

> The single best way to understand and appreciate Tolkien's fiction is to become literate in medieval literature. Optimally, one would learn Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse and Latin and read the many works that T.A. Shippey and others have shown to be the sources of Tolkien's world. (Drout 2002, xiii)

A truly ideal training programme for future Tolkien experts – and like so many ideal things, it has hardly ever been attained in this world. Professor Drout is, as one may have guessed, a mediaevalist of the Anglicist persuasion and therefore biased in favour of the 'interpretatio mediaevalis'. Thus, before proceeding, I would like to present briefly some other important approaches and see whether the 'interpretatio mediaevalis' is indeed the ideal way to Tolkien's work.

CRITICS

The literary works published during Tolkien's lifetime (1892-1973), i.e. *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Smith of Wootton Major*, *Farmer Giles of Ham* and *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, are, with the possible

exception of *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son*,[3] read, understood and enjoyed by a large non-mediaevalist audience. Most people seem to be happy without an 'interpretatio mediaevalis' – indeed, without any interpretation at all, whether literary or otherwise.

Things are different with literary critics, i.e. those persons who deal with literature professionally. With them the need for 'explanation' has been great, all the more so since *The Lord of the Rings* in particular has proven resistant to easy classification by means of the usual criteria and critical categories. As a result, *The Lord of the Rings* has been the victim of much (and often acerbic) critical abuse, which is more an expression of the literary critics' frustration and inability to come to terms with it than a sign of any inherent flaws. It seemed for a long time that the literary toolkit was simply not adequately equipped for dealing with such a work. Since the 1990s, however, critics such as Brian Rosebury (*Tolkien: A Critical Assessment*, 1992; revised and re-published as *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon*, 2003) and Tom Shippey (*J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, 2000) have successfully begun to explore the relationship of *The Lord of the Rings* to the dominant literary modes of the first half of the 20th century – notably that of modernism.[4] Tolkien's work, according to Shippey and Rosebury, can be best understood, like modernism, as a reaction to the prevailing cultural and economic situation. Such a re-evaluation of Tolkien's major literary work is, in my opinion, a promising approach and will, hopefully, further the understanding of the peculiarities of *The Lord of the Rings* so that it need no longer remain an erratic in the literary landscape

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3 *Beorhtnoth* does not seem to fit in very well with the other titles. After all, it was originally published not as a literary work, but in *Essays and Studies* (1953). It appeared as 'literature' in Tolkien's lifetime only in the American *The Tolkien Reader* (1966). Yet in the original article Tolkien refers to it as 'poem' and in 1954 a radio production of *Beorhtnoth* was performed on the BBC Third Programme.

4 See also the essays in the two volumes of *Tolkien and Modernity 1 & 2* (edited by Thomas Honegger and Frank Weinreich, 2006), Margaret Hiley's study *The Loss and the Silence* (2011), and the volume *Tolkien among the Moderns*, edited by Ralph Wood (2015).

of the 20th century.

It is not only the extraordinary literary characteristics of *The Lord of the Rings* that have attracted the attention of the critics. Since the mid-60s at the latest, we have had the situation that predominantly literary critical disdain has gone hand in hand with overwhelming (popular) public acclaim, which has found expression in numerous Tolkien societies and fan clubs.[5] Confronted with the 'Tolkien phenomenon', both critics and admirers have been looking for explanations and, maybe correctly, have begun to turn towards the author himself in search for answers.

TOLKIEN THE MAN

The unexpected success of *The Lord of the Rings* generated a lasting interest in the 'man behind Middle-earth' – not least since most of the mythological framework, of which the narrative gave only tantalising glimpses, remained for a long time inaccessible to the audience, so that Tolkien was the only person who could grant access to the wider realms of Arda. Although Tolkien proved to be a conscientious correspondent (see the selection of letters edited by Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien, which appeared in 1981 as *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*), the great majority of readers had to wait till Christopher Tolkien published *The Silmarillion* in 1977 and thus provided the necessary 'mythological' background to *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien himself took a critical stance towards the contemporary tendency to focus on the author and to neglect the work itself. He wrote in one of his letters: "[...] I object to the contemporary trend in criticism, with its excessive interest in the details of the lives of authors and artists. They only distract attention from an author's works [...]" (Carpenter 2000, 288).

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5 For a comprehensive overview on Tolkien's academic work, see Patrick Curry's chapter 'The Critical Response to Tolkien's Fiction' in Stuart D. Lee's *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien* (2014).

Consequently, he did not condone the publication of an authorised biography during his lifetime. One of the first biographies on Tolkien, Daniel Grotta-Kurska's *Architect of Middle-earth*, appeared in 1976, and one year later the 'official' biography by Humphrey Carpenter (*J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*) was published. Carpenter had the support of the Tolkien family and was given access to Tolkien's papers and writings. His biography is the most comprehensive study of Tolkien's life and provides fascinating insights into the author's creative processes. Today, almost half a century later, it still remains the unsurpassed and often mined standard biography, though of course the publication of a selection of Tolkien's letters (1981), of the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* (1983-1996), and a number of other works such as *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* (2009), *The Fall of Arthur* (2013), *A Secret Vice* (2016) etc. has given access to new material that would have to be assessed and incorporated in a revised edition.[6]

Soon after the publication of the authorised biography, various groups began to make use of and to modify the information provided by Carpenter for their interpretations of Tolkien's work. Humphrey Carpenter, being the son of Harry James Carpenter (Warden of Keble from 1955 onwards and Bishop of Oxford till 1970), did take some pains to present Tolkien's Catholicism from a neutral point of view without denying the central role of Tolkien's religious faith. During the 1990s, a Catholic 'reconquista' of Tolkien began, which has found its climax so far in Joseph Pearce's publications *Tolkien: Man and Myth. A literary life* (1998) and *Tolkien: A Celebration. Collected writings on a literary legacy* (1999). Tolkien's work, according to the more or less explicit argument of the

[6] Raymond Edwards' *Tolkien* (2014) could be seen as an 'updated' version of Carpenter's biography (1977), since Edwards includes Tolkien's numerous posthumous publications. Furthermore, Tolkien's experiences before and during World War I and their influence on his literary work have been researched by John Garth, whose *Tolkien and the Great War* (2003) is among the best publications on Tolkien in the new millennium.

'Catholic' critics, can only be fully and properly understood by fellow Catholics – or by people who are intimately familiar with Catholicism.[7] The very qualities and characteristics that make Tolkien's work, on the one hand, unique and, on the other, hard to fathom for most literary critics, have their roots in his Catholic faith.

The overwhelming popular success of Peter Jackson's film has brought Tolkien once more and with special emphasis to the attention of American (predominantly non-Catholic) Christians – with the result that the market is being flooded with books of very mixed quality that explore the 'spiritual' dimension of *The Lord of the Rings*. These studies typically stress the general Christian elements of Tolkien's work and tune down his specifically Catholic traits. Two examples may be mentioned. The first is a book by Mark Eddy Smith with the title *Tolkien's Ordinary Virtues. Exploring the Spiritual Themes of The Lord of the Rings*. It provides a 'pious' reading of *The Lord of the Rings* in thirty chapters. Each chapter focuses on a religious topic (humility, providence, sin, etc.), opening with a passage from *The Lord of the Rings* and concluding with some moral advice. The collection of essays edited by John G. West Jr. (*Celebrating Middle-earth. The Lord of the Rings as a Defense of Western Civilisation*.) offers better quality, though the individual contributions also concentrate on topics relevant to religion such as 'the Evil in Tolkien' etc. Almost all contributors are academics and the quality of the articles is accordingly higher than that of the book by Mark Eddy Smith, whose main qualification seems to be, according to the blurb, to have read *The Lord of the Rings* more than a dozen times.

Furthermore, with the posthumous publication of more and more of Tolkien's academic works, starting with the scholarly study *Finn and Hengest* (1982, edited by Alan Bliss), followed by a selection of his scholarly essays under the title *The Monsters and the Critics and Other*

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[7] The probably best introduction to the Catholic background of Tolkien's work is Stratford Caldecott's *The Power of the Ring* (2012).

Essays (1983, edited by Christopher Tolkien), we notice an increasing interest in Tolkien the academic.[8] This led to the publication of several more of his academic works, such as *Tolkien On Fairy-stories* (2008, edited by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas Anderson), *Beowulf. A Translation and Commentary together with Sellic Spell* (2014, edited by Christopher Tolkien), or *A Secret Vice* (2016, edited by Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins). Most recently, John M. Bowers investigated Tolkien's work on Chaucer in his *Tolkien's Lost Chaucer* (2019).[9]

Our next and for us most prominent interpretative approach to Tolkien, the 'interpretatio mediaevalis', must be seen parallel to and in connection with both the aforementioned 'interpretationes academicae et catholicae vel Christianae'.

TOLKIEN THE MEDIAEVALIST AND THE 'INTERPRETATIO MEDIAEVALIS'

Tolkien achieved lasting and world-wide fame as the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, but this came relatively late in life – he was, at the time of publication in 1954-55, already 62 years old and 'Tolkienmania' began only another ten years later with the (unauthorised) publication of the ACE Books paperback edition in the United States. Tolkien saw himself primarily as a philologist, a mediaevalist and a man of letters with a somewhat peculiar hobby, rather than an author in the usual sense of the word. After doing some work for the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1919-20), he embarked on a distinguished academic career. He was first Reader in English Language (1920-24) and then Professor of English Language (1924-25) at the University of Leeds, later Rawlinson and Bosworth

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8 Needless to say that Tom Shippey's unsurpassed *The Road to Middle-earth* (1982) as well as Humphrey Carpenter's *J.R.R. Tolkien. A Biography* (1977) have also contributed significantly to a deeper understanding of Tolkien's scholarly persona.

9 For a comprehensive overview on Tolkien's academic work, see my chapter 'Academic Writings' in Stuart D. Lee's *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien* (2014).

Professor of Anglo-Saxon (1925-45) and Merton Professor of English Language and Literature (1945-59) at the University of Oxford. His academic work determined the way he saw himself personally and professionally. Tolkien stressed repeatedly the importance of his 'professional' study of mediaeval languages and literatures for his literary works; they provided the indispensable 'soil' into which his 'tree of tales' would sink its roots and find nourishment. The dependence on and connection with mediaeval literature is most clearly seen in those works that imitate mediaeval models, e.g. his poems in *Songs for Philologists*, or in works that resume mediaeval themes, such as his radio-play *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*, which is a continuation of and, at the same time, a commentary on the Old English heroic poem *The Battle of Maldon*. Individual motifs that derive from or are shared with mediaeval literature are abundant in most of Tolkien's other literary works. The theft of the cup from the dragon-hoard and its disastrous consequences in *The Hobbit*, for example, are a conscious echo of a similar passage in the Old English heroic poem *Beowulf*. Such parallels are easily discernible even for non-mediaevalist readers, provided they have read the relevant mediaeval poems in translation.

The discovery of the mediaeval sources, parallels or analogues is more difficult if and because, as so often, Tolkien adapted them skilfully or if the influence they exerted is only indirect. A merely superficial knowledge of mediaeval English (and I may add, Norse) languages and literatures is, in such cases, no longer sufficient. The hour of the expert has come.

It was in 1979, two years after the publication of *The Silmarillion* and Carpenter's Tolkien-biography, that Jane Chance, formerly Professor at Rice University Texas, now Andrew W. Mellon Distinguished Professor Emerita in English, published her study *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England* (revised edition 2001, University Press of Kentucky). It was, next to Carpenter's biography, one of the first serious in-depth academic studies in which a scholar attempted to illustrate the indebtedness of Tolkien's

literary works to the vernacular literature of mediaeval England. *Tolkien's Art* suffers, in my opinion, from interpretative weaknesses, numerous factual mistakes and minor misconceptions (e.g. Sauron is called "a fallen Vala" (Chance 2001, 151) and also Gandalf is "most likely a Vala" (Chance 2001, 147);[10] Beowulf, after ruling the Geatas for 50 years, is still "a man of fifty" (Chance 2001, 117) and Galadriel gives Sam "seeds of *elanor*" (Chance 2001, 158), "Frodo is Bilbo's nephew and heir" (Chance 2001, 151)[11] as well as some truly 'Freudian' misprints such as "Gimli is Groin's [son/heir]" (Chance 2001, 151).[12] This tradition of misremembering names and plot-elements is continued in Chance's most recent book, *Tolkien, Self and Other* (2016). There, in the discussion of the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, the wrong guy gets beheaded (Chance 2016, 220 repeatedly confuses Beorhthelm/Byrhthelm with Beorhtnoth/Byrhtnoth), or things get a bit mixed up in the dark bedroom in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* (Chance 2016, 148) and the miller's wife gets 'swived' by one student too many. These rather glaring mistakes occur next to a host of smaller mistakes, such as the invention of a town named Buckville in the Shire (Chance 2016, 159), or a river called Brandybuck River (Chance 2016, 170), or the claim that Aragorn had no son (Chance 2016, 113), etc.

I am not going to bore my readers with any further enumerations of 'obvious' factual mistakes, but in order to underpin my criticism I would like to discuss briefly one example that illustrates the importance of specialised 'mediaevalist' knowledge in order to avoid interpretative pitfalls. It is, of course, ironic that this interpretative mistake occurs in Chance's *Tolkien's Art*, a study by a mediaevalist, and it has not been

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10 Both Sauron and Gandalf belong to the category of the Maiar, not the Valar.

11 Frodo and Bilbo are cousins, and not nephew and uncle! See Honegger 2020 for an in-depth discussion of this problem.

12 Gimli's father is Gloin, whereas Groin is Gimli's grandfather – so technically speaking Gimli could be called 'Groin's heir', but it strikes me as odd that Groin and not Gloin is mentioned.

corrected for the new edition of 2001 – which gives me all the more reason to do so now and, as I hope, save the honour of the mediaevalists. Chance, in her discussion of *Leaf by Niggle*, calls Niggle and Parish "the angel and the beast" (Chance 2001, 85). Such a crude and mistaken reduction of the two characters is hardly worth comment, not least since Tom Shippey (2003, 43) has proposed a convincing interpretation of Niggle and Parish as the creative and the practical side of Tolkien respectively. Chance goes on to interpret the voices overheard by Niggle in the darkness of the workhouse as different aspects of God (Chance 2001, 97), i.e. the Old Testament (vengeful) God versus the New Testament (forgiving) Christ. Such an interpretation is not as obviously wrong as the one mentioned before and may seem sound to the average reader. It is a well-known literary technique to depict inner debates by means of personifying the different ideas and attitudes. However, mediaeval theology (and probably modern Catholic theology, too) and mediaeval literature would feel very uneasy with multiple 'split' divine personalities. The Christian God constitutes the trinity of God Father, God Son, and Holy Ghost, yet this must not be taken as permission to see them as three independent consciousnesses. The German translation of 'Trinity', i.e. 'Dreieinigkeit' ('Three-in-one-ness'), expresses this idea much more clearly. God Father does not debate with God Son or the Holy Ghost – they share one common unified consciousness. These theological objections would not have arisen with the interpretation of the voices as the 'Daughters of God' debating in front of God Himself. The motif of the 'Four Daughters of God' (Justicia, Misericordia, Veritas, and Pax) is well-known in mediaeval literature and, in my opinion, the most likely source of inspiration for Tolkien's 'voices'. These 'Daughters of God' act respectively as prosecutor and advocate for the human soul in front of God's seat of judgment.[13] It is typically Justitia

[13] See the debate between Justitia ('Rytwysnes') and Misericordia ('Mercy') in the Middle English play *The Castle of Perseverance* (manuscript c. 1440). The relevant passages are to be found in scene XXII (Eccles 95-98).

and Misericordia who come to blows; the one advocates the severe punishment of the human soul for its sins, the other pleads forgiveness and pity. Such a scenario fully and satisfactorily explains the situation as depicted in *Leaf by Niggle* and does not have to rely on the rather heterodox idea of multiple divine personalities.

Not long after Chance's study pioneering but flawed *Tolkien's Art* (1979), we have the publication of Professor Tom Shippey's masterful *The Road to Middle-earth* (1st edition 1982, 2nd edition 1992, 3rd edition 2003), which is not only an excellent example of the 'interpretatio mediaevalis' but also one of the best Tolkien studies in general. It is not by chance that the title of his monograph alludes to John Livingston Lowe's study on the sources of Coleridge's inspirations for his poem *Kubla Khan* (*The Road to Xanadu*, published 1927). Shippey, in the tradition of Lowe, shows with great eloquence and erudition how the philological-mediaeval tradition functioned as the well-spring for Tolkien's inspiration on all levels, ranging from minute details to literary motifs or large-scale structural models. Shippey's study brought home the importance of the 'interpretatio mediaevalis' with great force and established the strong position of the mediaeval approach within the field of Tolkien studies. Unfortunately, it seems that Shippey's erudition and excellence have left little of importance to discover in this field. Yet even if we cannot expect new insights of similar importance, there remains plenty to do within the established areas and two 'new generations' of mediaevalists have been busy emulating Shippey and 'gleaning' the fields he had reaped for the first time almost four decades ago. Lastly, the archives may still hold in stock some interesting material, as the recent publications of Tolkien's *Beowulf* translation and John Bower's study on Tolkien's work on Chaucer have shown.

LEVELS OF THE 'INTERPRETATIO MEDIAEVALIS'

In the following I will present some of the most popular mediaeval approaches and discuss their usefulness.

On the 'lowest' level we find individual parallels to and borrowings from mediaeval literatures and languages. It is thanks to mediaevalists that we know that the dwarves (and Gandalf) in *The Hobbit* are named after the dwarfs in the 'Dvergatal' in the *Edda*, or that the 'Golden Hall' of the Rohirrim, Meduseld, derives its name from the Old English term for 'mead-hall', 'meduseld' (to be found in *Beowulf* l. 3065). Furthermore, a mediaevalist will immediately realise that a person called Gríma, son of Gálmód, must be a rather suspicious character since 'grîma' (sb. m.) means in Old English 'mask, helmet, ghost',[14] and 'gâlmoth' (adj.) as much as 'wanton, licentious'. Examples on this 'literal' level could be multiplied almost endlessly and are especially prominent among names of persons and places. The functions of these 'mediaeval' names are, on the one hand, to provide a link to the mediaeval legends and myths and to give to the 'educated reader' a sense of déjà vu. On the other hand, they hint at the moral disposition of a protagonist or at his or her character according to the principle 'nomen est omen'.

Another level is reached with motifs that have been taken over and adapted from mediaeval literature. Thus, the way Aragorn and his companions gain access to Théoden only gradually is modelled upon the depiction of Beowulf's arrival in Denmark and his reception at Hrothgar's court. Tolkien could alternatively have invented a 'court etiquette' of his own or looked for inspiration in another culture or era. The Rohirrim are, by and large, Anglo-Saxons in temperament and culture. Yet Tolkien took some liberties and adapted the historical model to his purposes, as the

[14] Gríma corresponds, on the one hand, to the provocative counsellor Unferth in *Beowulf*. See Rateliff (1988) for a discussion of Gríma and his mediaeval sources and analogues.

prominence of horses and cavalry shows.[15] The advantages of adapting a (most likely) historical interaction pattern lie in the feeling of authenticity it evokes and in the (inter-)textual allusions it creates. In the following, I will take a closer look at how Tolkien brought into being an intricate web of (inter-)textual allusion, namely by means of adapting the Germanic ritual of 'wassailing' or drinking to someone's health.[16] The ritual of 'presenting the cup to the lord or king' is known as part of the feast depicted in *Beowulf* (ll. 612-631). The mistress of the house, in this instance Wealhtheow, the queen-consort of Hrothgar, offers a cup of wine first to the king and then to the other members of the court and Beowulf. It is a ritual designed to represent and to affirm the hierarchical structure of the court while strengthening the cohesion between its members and shows the queen as an independently acting person. The parallels between this Germanic ritual and the drinking ritual in the chapter 'The King of the Golden Hall' are obvious:

> The king rose, and at once Éowyn came forward bearing wine. *'Ferthu Théoden hál!'* she said. 'Receive now this cup and drink in happy hour. Health be with thee at thy going and coming!' Theoden drank from the cup, and she then proffered it to the guests. As she stood before Aragorn she paused suddenly and looked upon him, and her eyes were shining. And he looked down upon her fair face and smiled; but as he took the cup, his hand met hers, and he knew that she trembled at the touch. 'Hail Aragorn son of Arathorn!' she said. 'Hail Lady of Rohan!' he answered, but his face now was troubled and he did not smile. (*LotR* 545)

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[15] The historical Anglo-Saxons knew and valued horses, of course, but they dismounted before battle and fought on foot. See the paragraph 'The horse in Anglo-Saxon warfare' in Harrison (1993, 12). For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between the historical Anglo-Saxons and Tolkien's Rohirrim, see the independently conceived and simultaneously published studies by Drout (2011) and Honegger (2011).

[16] See Honegger (1999) for an in-depth discussion of this motif.

Tolkien obviously wrote this passage with the older model from *Beowulf* in mind. There, it is not a young maiden that serves the wine (or in this case mead), but Wealhtheow, king Hrothgar's wife, mother of three children, and queen of the Danes – a rather matronly figure.[17] She dispenses not only refreshments and gold, but also words of wisdom and advice (cf. lines 1159-91). Unfortunately, the passage from *Beowulf* which shows closest parallels to Tolkien's account tells us only about her offering a cup to Hrothgar and the other guests but does not give the actual words that must have accompanied the gesture. However, it is very probable that they would have been something like 'Wæs thu hal, ...'. The queen – or noble lady – as the dispenser of drink is probably the original model for Tolkien's depiction of Éowyn, who also addresses first the king (Théoden, her uncle), and then his guests. Not much potential for development in this context.

It is the figure of Rowena, however shadowy she appears, that provides a submerged link to the tradition of young women used by a relative (in her case Hengest, her father) to seduce and manipulate an older, powerful man (i.e. Vortigern). Rowena appears in mediaeval accounts of the conquest and settling of Britain by the Anglo-Saxon tribes.[18] She is the daughter of Hengest, one of the leaders of the Germanic tribes that began to pour into Britain after the withdrawal of the last Roman legions in 410. Hengest and his men are first, as mercenaries, in the service of Vortigern, a British leader in the south of England. Hengest plots to take over the power and uses his beautiful young daughter Rowena to extend his influence over Vortigern. He has her dressed in rich clothes and presents her to Vortigern at a feast where she kneels down and offers him a cup of wine with the words – and here I follow Layamon (l. 7141): "Lauerd king wæs hæil. For thine kime

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17 On Wealhtheow in general, see also the in-depth study by Damico (1984).

18 See Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regnum Britanniae* (Latin, c. 1138) and the vernacular versions/adaptations of Geoffrey's chronic by Wace (*Brut*, Anglo-Norman, c. 1155) and Layamon (*Brut*, Middle English, c. 1190-1215). Aurner, in her study of Hengest, offers a comprehensive overview of the various 'Wassail'-episodes.

ich æm uæin."[19] Of course, these words were originally not spoken in Middle English but in proto-Old English, the language of the Germanic invaders of the 5th century. Vortigern, a Celtic-speaking Briton, does not understand proto-Old English and has it translated by one of his warriors. This interpreter, according to Layamon, not only translates Rowena's words but also provides an explanatory commentary on her gestures and the meaning of her greeting. It is customary with the Saxons and other Germanic tribes to drink to a friend's health by saying 'leofue freond wæs hail',[20] to down the wine, refill the cup and offer it to the friend, who then answers 'thrinc hail'[21] and empties the cup. The ritual concludes with the two kissing three times. Vortigern is delighted with the prospect of kissing Rowena, so they go through the 'wassailing'[22] ritual. As a consequence of this first encounter, Vortigern falls in love with Rowena, marries her, and Hengest as his father-in-law becomes the leading power behind the throne. Mediaeval chroniclers present the episode at length because it explains the (infamous) English drinking custom of 'wassailing'.

Rowena is not the only young woman used by a relative to manipulate a king. Salome is the most prominent example of this tradition, maybe because of her claim to fame as the alleged inventor of the art of striptease. Rowena, however, succeeds without such strenuous exercise, and Éowyn is even further removed from consciously using her charms. Yet the 'Beowulfian' mode which has so far dominated the passage in Tolkien undergoes a slight but significant change. When Éowyn addresses Aragorn with 'Hail Aragorn son of Arathorn!', which could be interpreted as a shortened rendering of the Old English 'Wæs þu hal, Aragorn Arathornes sunu!', it is no longer solely as the female head of the royal household, but

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19 Translation: 'Lord king, may you be of good health! I am glad about your coming.'

20 Translation: 'Dear friend, to your health!'

21 Translation: '[I] drink to your health.'

22 'Wassail' is a contraction of 'wæs hæil'.

also as a young, attractive maiden – as Aragorn has noticed a short while before (*LotR* 537). What is more, she is obviously falling in love with him.[23] Thus, we have a 'Rowena' element coming in at this moment. The asexual 'Beowulfian' world in *Lord of the Rings* suffers the intrusion of an ever so slight element of eroticism. No swapping of cups, no lascivious kissing for Éowyn and Aragorn, though.[24] The only bodily contact that takes place is the (accidental?) touching of their hands which was preceded by the silent message of her shining eyes and Aragorn's innocuous answering smile, which he abandons as soon as he notices Éowyn's emotional state by the touch of their hands. He has become aware that this 'wassailing' is no longer of 'Beowulfian' nature, although Éowyn is certainly no Rowena-like seductress, and the drinking ritual is, to many 20th-century readers, reminiscent rather of the eucharist than of the sensuous 'wassailing' custom.

The importance of the incident lies in the fact that the Rowena-Vortigern story serves as a hidden contrast to the passage in Tolkien. By implicit comparison, Tolkien provides the model of a morally and ethically responsible leader. Aragorn, unlike Vortigern, has no problems resisting the sensuous temptation, which is not very prominent in Tolkien's account anyway. The real problem for Aragorn is how to reject Éowyn's advances as tactfully and humanly as possible[25] – because a rejection is what is called for. Thus, the emotion that poses the greatest danger to Aragorn is not lust,

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23 The encounter between Aragorn and Éowyn had originally been designed to initiate a love-story that would end with the marriage of the two, as becomes evident from Tolkien's notes and early drafts (cf. Tolkien 1989, 448).

24 Note, however, that the 'stirrup cup' on the occasion of Aragorn's departure for the Path of the Dead is a shared one (*LotR* 816) and he kisses her hand upon leaving (*LotR* 817).

25 Gawain, the eponymous hero of the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which was well known to Tolkien, faces a similar problem, as Burnley (1995, 30) points out: "The expressed problem ([lines] 1770-75) which faces Gawain is how to reject the lady's advances whilst offering no insult, retaining her esteem, and preserving his faith to her husband."

but pity. If he were to accept Éowyn's offer of devotion and love, he would do so out of pity.

We now turn from those instances where the mediaeval heritage has been easy to discern and take a closer look at a less obvious 'mediaeval' influence, i.e. the problem of the perception of time in Middle-earth.

Sam, and with him the reader, is asking himself after the sojourn in Lórien why the waxing moon suggests that they spent only a few days there. He finally shares his bafflement with his companions:

> 'It's very strange,' he murmured. 'The Moon's the same in the Shire and in Wilderland, or it ought to be. But either it's out of its running, or I'm all wrong in my reckoning. You'll remember, Mr. Frodo, the Moon was waning as we lay on the flet up in that tree: a week from the full, I reckon. And we'd been a week on the way last night, when up pops a New Moon as thin as a nail-paring, as if we had never stayed no time in the Elvish country. Well, I can remember three nights there for certain, and I seem to remember several more, but I would take my oath it was never a whole month. Anyone would think that time did not count in there!' (*LotR* 408)

Legolas then tries to explain this phenomenon:

> 'Nay, time does not tarry ever,' he said; 'but change and growth is not in all things and places alike. For the Elves the world moves, and it moves both very swift and very slow. Swift, because they themselves change little, and all else fleets by: it is a grief to them. Slow, because they do not count the running years, not for themselves. The passing seasons are but ripples ever repeated in the long long stream. Yet beneath the Sun all things must wear to an end at last.' […] ' (*LotR* 408-409)

And Aragorn concludes:

> ‘But so it is, Sam: in that land you lost your count. There time flowed swiftly by us, as for the Elves. […].’
> (*LotR* 409)

The differing perception of time by the different species is the starting point for Verlyn Flieger’s fascinating study *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Road to Faërie* (1997). Flieger investigates in detail the theoretical concepts on which Tolkien bases the perception of time and space in Middle-earth and illustrates his indebtedness to contemporary scientific theories and ideas. The most significant book on this topic is obviously J.W. Dunne’s *An Experiment with Time* (first edition 1927; revised and enlarged third edition 1934). Tolkien, like C.S. Lewis, owned a copy of the third edition, and Dunne’s ideas must have been discussed among the Inklings (Flieger 47). *An Experiment with Time* influenced other contemporary authors, too. Thus the playwright John Balderstone has one of his protagonists summarise Dunne’s ideas on time and space in his play *Berkeley Square* (1929) as follows (quoted in Flieger 1997, 57):

> Suppose you are in a boat, sailing down a winding stream. You watch the banks as they pass you. You went by a grove of maple trees upstream. But you can’t see them now, so you saw them in the *past*, didn’t you? You’re watching a field of clover now; it’s before your eyes at this moment, in the *present*. But you don’t know what’s around the bend in the stream there ahead of you; there may be wonderful things, but you can’t see them until you get around the bend in the *future*, can you? Now remember, *you’re* in a boat. But *I’m* looking up in the sky above you, in a plane. I’m looking down on it all. I can see *all at once* the trees you saw upstream, the field of clover that you see now, and what’s waiting for you around the bend ahead! *All at once!* So the past, present, and future of the man in the boat are all *one* to

> the man in the plane. Doesn't that show how all Time must really be one? Real Time with a capital T is nothing but an idea in the mind of God.

Balderstone has succeeded in rendering Dunne's scientific jargon into easily comprehensible language. He uses, instead of talking about 'Observer 1', 'Observer 2' or 'ultimate observer' etc., everyday imagery and prefers to talk about a man in a boat (corresponding to Dunne's 'Observer 1') and a man in a plane (corresponding to Dunne's 'ultimate observer'). This way he manages to communicate Dunne's concept of 'qualified' perception of time in a clear and convincing manner. Similar differences in the perception of time seem to apply to the different races of Middle-earth, as Legolas' remarks suggest. Verlyn Flieger discusses the ramifications of this question at length in her book, though they are of no further relevance for our topic.

The question of how divine beings and Eru/Illúvatar Himself perceive time, however, is highly relevant – and, interestingly, not dealt with by Flieger. The chapter 'The Music of the Ainur' in *The Silmarillion* describes how the creation of the cosmos and the world is outlined in broad terms by the music of the Ainur. Those Ainur who decided to participate actively in the creation of Arda, i.e. the Valar, have agreed to remain within the boundaries of this world and to subject themselves to a life in time, even if they do not age or decay. They also possess, due to their participation in the Music of Creation, a knowledge of things and events to come – which is, however, not complete. They are, to use Dunne's terminology, 'observers of a higher order'. Eru/Illúvatar, then, could be seen as the 'ultimate observer'. Only he knows about the fate of the Children of Illúvatar, i.e. the Elves and Men, and even if the Music of Creation has to unfold 'in time', He alone perceives it all at once and in its entirety.

What, then, has this to do with the 'interpretatio mediaevalis'? Nothing – at least at first sight. Flieger has been able to explain satisfactorily the phenomenon of the differing perceptions of time by researching the theories

concerning time and space prevalent in the first three decades of the 20th century and by placing Tolkien's concept in the context of the contemporary discussion. If a mediaevalist had taken on the same task, however, then a different explanation would have been offered. A mediaevalist would rely rather on Boethius than Dunne or Balderstone. Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 470-524) was a politician and philosopher who fell from grace at the court of the Ostrogoth king Theoderic, was imprisoned and later executed. During his time on 'death row' he composed the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, a philosophical dialogue between the first-person narrator and Lady Philosophy. Boethius' work was later translated into Old English by King Alfred the Great, into Middle English by Geoffrey Chaucer, and into early Modern English by Queen Elizabeth I, and its influence on mediaeval thinking cannot be overestimated. One of the central problems discussed in the dialogues is the question of human free will versus divine providence.[26] How is it possible for a human being to choose freely if there exists an omniscient and all-powerful God who knows the outcome of every action in advance? The answer given by Lady Philosophy is as follows:

> [...] since the state of God is ever that of eternal presence, His knowledge, too, transcends all temporal changes and abides in the immediacy of His presence. It embraces all the infinite recesses of past and future and views them in the immediacy of its knowing as though they are happening in the present. [...] For it [i.e. God's knowledge] is far removed from matters below and looks forth at all things as though from a lofty peak above them. (Book V, §6, Watts 1999, 134)

Lady Philosophy is not, as yet, familiar with aeroplanes, but her "and looks forth at all things as though from a lofty peak above them" expresses the

[26] See especially Book V, §3-6.

same idea. Tolkien's conception of time and space was certainly influenced by Dunne's theory. Yet Dunne in turn (unwittingly?) uses concepts that go back to late antiquity and presents them in modern 'scientific' terminology ('ultimate observer' versus 'God'). It does not matter for the modern reader whether we take Dunne or Boethius as our point of departure. Flieger is able to explain Tolkien's concept of time without mentioning Boethius even once, and she must be credited with establishing Dunne's theories as an obvious influence on Tolkien – few people would have ever realised this if Flieger had not investigated the publications of the 1920s.[27] For this achievement I would like to express my admiration.

Yet as a mediaevalist I cannot but point out that Dunne is 'secondary', chronologically speaking as well as with regard to Tolkien, and that the primary inspiration is most likely from Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. Unfortunately, I have not been able to check the handwritten notes in Tolkien's copy of Dunne's *An Experiment with Time*, but I can very well imagine that we would find a scribbled reference such as 'see Boethius V.6'.[28]

CONCLUSION

Are mediaevalists 'better' readers of Tolkien? My very personal answer is a qualified 'yes'. Mediaevalists see more and are able to understand and use Tolkien's own standards in order to assess his work, whereas many literary critics are no longer even familiar with these standards, let alone being in sympathy with them.

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27 Alex Lewis and Elizabeth Curry, in their *The Uncharted Realms of Tolkien*, also aim at the exploration of the literary and cultural context of Tolkien's work.

28 For more information on Tolkien's copies of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae* and Dunne's *An Experiment with Time*, see Oronzo Cilli's *Tolkien's Library: An Annotated Checklist* (2019, 23 [no. 174] and 76 [no. 607], respectively).

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